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## Taking risks: feminist activism and research in the Americas, edited by Julie Shayne, Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2014, 324 pp., US\$27.95 (paperback) ISBN-10: 1438452454.

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Taking risks: feminist activism and research in the Americas**, edited by Julie Shayne, Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2014, 324 pp., US\$27.95 (paperback) ISBN-10: 1438452454.

In *Taking Risks: Feminist Activism and Research in the Americas*, Julie Shayne has brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars, activists, and artists to contribute to the extensive literature and vibrant debates on the relationship between scholarship and activism. Various known under labels such as applied, public, engaged, activist, or participatory action research, or as feminist, anti-racist, and/or anti-oppression research, Shayne and her co-authors choose the terms “activist scholarship” and “social justice scholarship”, which they use interchangeably. In this volume, social justice scholarship refers “to the factors that motivate us to research, along with the desired outcome to which we see ourselves contributing” (p. xix). Social justice research makes explicit that the starting point is political and works through reflection to examine the social relations of research and to place researcher and researched on the same epistemological terrain.

Contributors to the volume are “a collection of scholars/activists/artists” (p. xxxii). All but Chilean-Canadian writer, Carmen Rodríguez, are based in the United States. Several chapters explore the work of activist scholars involved in transnational solidarity cultural work with visual artists, poets, theater productions, and bilingual fiction writers and magazine publishers. Teaching and pedagogy as contexts for social justice scholarship is another main theme in *Taking Risks*. Shayne incorporates students in the volume in an intergenerational knowledge exchange and several chapters discuss student-training projects.

One of the innovative sites for activist scholarship explored in *Taking Risks* is archiving. Storytelling, listening out for marginalized experience (“political listening”), and prioritizing personal interviews, testimonies, literature, and other alternative forms of data are key methods in social justice research. Activists are privileged as experts and as public intellectuals and their stories are curated as documents, as primary sources. Archiving, then, becomes as important as listening. Several contributors to *Taking Risks* present examples of archiving as activist work. Tamera Marko, in her chapter “We also Built the City of Medellín: *Deplazadas*’ Family Albums as Feminist Archival Activism”, discusses a video project that documents women’s work in rebuilding home and family among the population of more than 220,000 that has been displaced by violence and moved into Medellín, Colombia, since the 1950s. Marko’s archive of family albums and stories documents lives of violence, displacement, and resilience of more than 650 women and complicates the city’s official narrative promulgated for tourism.

Marko also reflects on the gender, race, and class-based skepticism activist researchers encounter in the field. She recalls one day, reading newspapers and examining photographs in the Medellín public library, when the man next to her asked “Why are you here? What are you looking for?” When she explained she was documenting the roles of displaced women in building Medellín, he continued with “What are you going to do with this information? Gringuita, who are you trying to help?” Marko describes how this moment forced her to reflect on her purpose. “I was struck by his assumption that my

purpose was to ‘help.’ I was uncomfortable because it framed my research in terms of charity or social welfare. This was not my intention. My intention, however vague at that stage, was research as social justice... But what about my research was truly social justice? And for whom?” Remembering her original curiosity about why women’s perspectives on their own displacement and re-settlement were invisible in official narratives of the city’s history, Marko then formulated a clearer research question: “what happens when the ‘official’ and ‘popular’ stories about your neighbourhood do not match what you archive in your family album?” Further, she decided to take the action of founding a historical memory archive in Medellín (pp. 119–121).

Cuban-American Marisela Fleites-Lear also describes how activist scholars can face public disciplining and how she turned such a moment into a learning experience and an affirmation of her identity as a scholar-activist. She begins her fascinating chapter, “Navigating the Cuban Ideological Divide: Research on the Independent Libraries Movement”, by recounting how the Cuban delegation to the Latin American Studies Association meetings in Washington, D.C. in 1995 would not allow her to sit at the panel table, publicly telling her to move into the audience until it was her turn to present the last paper. She recalls how reflecting on this moment has since helped motivate her to wade through the difficulties she encounters (“walking the tightrope” she calls it) and to persevere to learn more about the Project of Independent Libraries (PBI), a social movement that emerged in Cuba in 1998. The PBI seeks to “offer different educational venues” than the official library system and is “part of a growing number of institutions in an incipient alternative civil society on the island” (p. 97). Initially the libraries were created in people’s houses “with whatever books they had” (p. 98). By 2011, there were 156 independent libraries and around 2,576 reading groups that received books and materials from the libraries. The movement has also created the new public space of a literary contest and prize that provides a venue for Cuban writers who cannot get published on the island.

“Taking risks” also refers to the risks that activism continues to pose to academic careers. Reminiscent of Ruth Behar’s examination of the divergences and tensions between her work as a scholar in the academy and her activism as a Cuban-American two decades ago in *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story* (1993), Julie Shayne reflects on her experience in a discipline-based academic department. Shayne sees the burgeoning of interdisciplinary programs as more welcoming sites for social justice scholarship than traditional departments, including her home discipline of sociology. Despite professed expectations of funders and university administrators that research will speak to social concerns and be undertaken in collaboration with “community partners”, the status and prestige system within academic disciplines and tenure-and-promotion committees, Shayne writes, continues to diminish such research as “applied”, meaning “not theoretical enough”, as “political” or “personal”, not scientific and objective.

*Taking Risks* is suitable for undergraduate and interdisciplinary teaching. One absence is indigenous feminism, such an important site of current activist scholarship in the Americas, North and South.

## Reference

Behar, R. 1993. *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

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